

# NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

*Protecting Parks for Future Generations*

**Testimony of  
Gretchen Long  
Former Chair, Board of Trustees  
National Parks Conservation Association**

**Re: “The National Parks: Will they survive for future generations?”**

**before the  
Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources  
of the House Government Reform Committee  
U.S. House of Representatives**

**April 22, 2005**

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am Gretchen Long, a current member and former chair of the board of trustees of the National Parks Conservation Association. It is a privilege to be here today as the subcommittee delves into the extraordinary challenges that face our national parks.

Since 1919, the nonpartisan National Parks Conservation Association has been the leading voice of the American people in protecting and enhancing our National Park System for present and future generations. Today we have 300,000 members nationwide who care deeply about our national parks.

I personally have visited more than 200 units of the National Park System: From walking the Freedom Trail in Boston where I grew up, to hiking in Big Bend in Texas; from canoeing Gates of the Arctic to visiting the home of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Atlanta – I, like millions of Americans, have sought inspiration, recreation, education, and relaxation in national parks—places that preserve superlative examples of our country’s magnificent resources and heritage, and help us teach our children and grandchildren about who we as Americans are and what values we have struggled to uphold.

We are grateful, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Cummings, that you and your fellow subcommittee members are dedicating this unprecedented series of oversight hearings to the



1300 19<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036  
Telephone (202) 223-NPCA (6722) • Fax (202) 659-0650



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condition of our national parks. We also appreciate your leadership in sponsoring the National Park Centennial Act, which can do much to rectify the fiscal woes of the national parks.

### **The Challenge Facing America's Parks**

Over our 86-year history NPCA has found that the most pervasive challenge facing America's parks is the failure of successive congresses and presidential administrations to fund them adequately. The national parks face two deficits—an annual operating shortfall that exceeds \$600 million and a debilitating backlog of deferred maintenance projects estimated at between \$4.5 and \$9.7 billion. In addition, funding for the acquisition of nationally important lands has been drying up.

To bring attention to the multiple funding-related challenges that face the national parks, NPCA recently released *Faded Glory: Top 10 Reasons to Reinvest in America's National Park Heritage*. *Faded Glory* examines the very real risks to the National Park System posed by chronic underfunding—poaching that could eliminate 19 species from the parks; crumbling historic buildings and structures, two-thirds of which are in need of repair; unsafe roads; the theft of precious artifacts of American history; loss of critical habitat to invasive species; and many more challenges.

Managing the National Park System is an enormous undertaking. The 388 units that comprise the National Park System include more than 30,000 structures and 80 million artifacts. The Park Service's portfolio includes 8,000 miles of roads, 1,500 bridges, 5,385 housing units, 1,500 water and wastewater systems, 200 radio systems, 400 dams and more than 200 solid waste operations. These are all integrated into a magnificent, awe-inspiring repository of our collective American heritage. As has been said, if the Smithsonian is our nation's attic, the national parks are the rest of the house.

### **Classrooms without Teachers**

A particularly troubling impact of the \$600 million annual operating shortfall is the dwindling number of education programs and other opportunities in the parks. While 90 percent of Americans say that they are drawn to the national parks for educational benefits, funding shortfalls have resulted in only one interpreter per 100,000 visitors. Insufficient funding means a lost

opportunity to excite, educate and inspire the schoolchildren who could be the next Thomas Edison, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Stephen Mather.

The recurring shortfall in operational funding means that many schools that request guided tours in parks to enliven their students' lessons in science or history are turned away because of a shortage in park interpretive and educational staff. All too often, visitors who try to find information at park visitor centers during the middle of the week are finding locked doors and no rangers. During fiscal year 2004, Shenandoah National Park offered 800 fewer ranger-led programs than it did just two years before. The museum exhibit at Gettysburg, the world's classroom on the American Civil War, contains a wealth of items that tell the story of the battle and offer a glimpse into the life of a Civil War soldier, but more than half of the items in Park Service museums and archival collections have yet to be catalogued or shared with visitors. At Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, a short drive from Washington or Baltimore, the Park Service must deny a ranger-led tour to three out of every four school groups that request one due to the shortage of interpretive staff. Gettysburg must deny one out of four such requests.

Each time school children are denied such an experience, we lose a vital opportunity to connect them with American history—the role Harpers Ferry played as a safe haven for so many runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad; the part the Lewis & Clark expedition played in the settlement of the west; the meaning of such great places as Independence Hall and Valley Forge, which were so significant to the birth of our nation; the role of W.E.B. Dubois and the Niagara Movement. The national parks enrich our culture, enlarge our minds, and bring history to life in a manner difficult to accomplish through even the best of textbooks.

According to the Harpers Ferry business plan, the park had an annual shortfall in 2002 of more than \$660,000 and a shortage of nearly 13 full-time equivalent positions (FTE) in education and interpretation, alone—a shortfall of more than 25%. The entirety of Harpers Ferry's program areas, including maintenance, research and resource protection, are more than \$3.5 million and nearly 60 FTE short of the need. In other words, Harpers Ferry had only 64 cents for every dollar it needed for routine operations.

The business plan for Everglades National Park, one of the largest remaining subtropical wilderness areas in the United States, reveals an annual operations shortfall of \$10 million. In addition, the park does not have the funds to fill 41 positions, which has made it necessary to cut the number of ranger-led education programs from 115 per week to fewer than 40 per week. Moreover, some education programs that were once free to the public now cost visitors \$20 each.

With its proximity to millions of Floridians, Everglades could do much more to reach nearby diverse ethnic populations that too often are underserved by the national parks.

During the recent mid-week visit by one NPCA staff member to Olympic National Park, a remarkable natural area in the State of Washington known for its spectacular glacier-capped mountains, rare temperate rainforest, and extraordinary biological diversity, the visitor center was closed. Instead, our staff person was greeted by an electronic ranger-in-a-box--a computer terminal accessible to visitors standing outside the locked visitor center door, which may be used to search the park's website for information about trails, wildlife, and other sites. Certainly this is a creative effort by the park to make do with scarce resources. But we must ask ourselves what is sacrificed when we use such means to interact with the public, rather than the park rangers who so enrich the national park experience.

Last summer at historic Cades Cove, one of the most popular sites in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the park could afford only one full-time and one part-time interpreter to greet and educate the cove's two million annual visitors. The business plan for the park, which is the most visited national park in the nation with nearly 10 million annual visits, indicates the park has only 14 FTE for education and interpretation—half of what is needed, and a ratio of more than 640,000 visitors to each full time interpreter. This staff must provide educational opportunities, research and develop programs, produce interpretive trail signage and exhibits for roadsides and visitor centers, and meet other such needs in a park more than half a million acres in size, divided between North Carolina and Tennessee.

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park (C&O Canal) extends along the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. west to Cumberland, Maryland, and was established to protect and interpret the most intact canal system remaining from that era in America's industrial history. Although C&O Canal serves 3 million annual visitors, staffing declines mean that only one person is available for each of the park's four visitor centers. When one of these individuals calls in sick, the visitor center is closed, leaving tourists without a resource from which to learn about this historic, 185-mile-long canal system. In fact, C&O Canal is one of the system's most severely underfunded parks. An analysis by NPCA in partnership with the National Park Service of the park's fiscal year 2001 annual operating budget of \$7.9 million revealed that the park has only 37 cents for every dollar it needs to do the job that the public expects and Congress requires. The park's fiscal year 2005 budget is \$8.1 million. The business plan revealed the need for 299.2 FTE to conduct the routine duties required to run the park. However, actual FTE from all funding

sources (except emergency flood-related funding) declined from 125 FTE in fiscal year 1995, to an estimated 95 FTE in fiscal year 2005. Resources management staffing fell from 9 FTE to 2.

Cuyahoga Valley National Park in Ohio has an annual shortfall of \$1.4 million. This has led to reduced staffing, which in turn has led to fewer interpretive programs and fewer hours of operation for park visitor centers. While visitation continues to grow, the park has had to reduce its 170 full-time equivalent employees by roughly 20.

NPCA has witnessed this trend in declining educational and interpretive services systemwide. In 1999, the Park Service had 1,847 full-time interpretive rangers and 843 part-time rangers. By 2004, even though the total number of park units has increased, the Park Service had to manage with 56 fewer full-time and 116 fewer part time interpreters (1,791 full-time and 727 part-time). The budget increase that Congress provided last year may temporarily stop this downward trend but parks need the funds to reverse it, regain lost ground, and boost education and interpretive staffing to appropriate levels that can meet visitor demands.

### **Visitor Safety Concerns in Parks**

Staffing shortages are also hurting other important park services such as law enforcement and visitor safety services. As a resident of Wilson, Wyoming, a community that lies on the border of Grand Teton National Park, I can speak directly to this issue. My family, friends, and I have enjoyed many hikes in Grand Teton and nearby Yellowstone's backcountry and wilderness areas. But I have learned that patrols by park rangers in the backcountry of many of our large parks, such as Grand Teton, have been reduced.

As the former chair of the board of the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), I know that risk management is a critical part of any backcountry experience and that backcountry rangers are a critical part of any large park's operation. Rangers who meet hikers in the backcountry provide important advice about such things as avoiding conflicts with bears and warnings about dangerous weather. Ironically, search and rescue operations cost parks far more than the funding of adequate backcountry patrols. But many park managers are being left with no other choice than to reduce patrols and wait until the next emergency strikes.

Last October, an early winter storm stranded a number of hikers and climbers in Sequoia/Kings Canyon and Yosemite National Parks, resulting in several deaths. Yet Sequoia's backcountry patrols were effectively closed down for the season, resulting in much less information

and advice being available to backcountry users and more complicated and expensive search and rescue operations.

Diminished ranger patrols also allow crime to proliferate, resulting in the destruction and theft of park resources. Just having rangers visible in park front and backcountry areas can discourage crime. But today in Shenandoah National Park, poachers kill black bears so they can sell their gall bladders on the black market for \$3000 each. Brown bears are being poached from Katmai National Preserve in Alaska. In its fiscal year 2005 budget, the administration raised concerns that the illegal removal of wildlife from parks could cause the extirpation of 19 species from the parks. Without better staffing, the wildlife and other resources that people visit parks to see will continue to be at risk.

Safety and conservation issues manifest themselves at Assateague Island National Seashore in Maryland and Virginia, which preserves outstanding coastal resources and the ecological systems on which they depend. Two million visitors travel to this wild beach annually to enjoy a wealth of recreational activities compatible with natural resource protection. Since fiscal year 2000 the park has been forced to lapse seven positions, including four lifeguard positions at its popular beaches. In fiscal year 2005 the park has no seasonal resources management staff, compared to the recent past, when the park has relied on up to six seasonal resources staff to set up enclosures around endangered piping plover nests to protect them from predators, and to conduct surveys on the endangered sea beach amaranth.

### **Park Road and Transportation Needs**

The lack of funding also diminishes the experience of visitors who must travel on park roads that are frequently crumbling, overcrowded, and unsafe. During seasons with peak visitation, many roads in our national parks are so jammed with traffic the experience they seek is diminished.

Grand Teton National Park, near my home in Wyoming, is working hard to improve the safety and options for visitor travel, and will unveil a new transportation plan this summer for visitor access that will include bicycling, walking and transit alternatives. It became apparent that such a plan was critically needed after the tragic deaths of two cyclists—one in the park and one nearby—who were forced to travel on the narrow edges of roads because no alternative paths were available to them. Other parks face similar challenges.

Approximately two thirds of the more than 5,000 miles of roadways in the national parks are in poor to fair condition, according to the US Department of Transportation. The road repair

portion of the backlog exceeds \$3 billion. In addition, DOT estimates the Park Service will need \$1.6 billion over the next 20 years to meet transit demands. Yet, the Park Roads and Parkways Program funded under the Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century provides only \$165 million per year. The administration's proposal to fund the parks at \$320 million, if enacted, can do more than any single piece of legislation likely to pass this year to begin to address this enormous shortfall.

### **The Burgeoning Park Maintenance Backlog**

The much discussed maintenance backlog continues to be an intractable problem which, according to the National Park Service, "has had a profound effect on the visitor experience and the public's ability to appreciate and enjoy our national parks' natural, historic, and cultural wonders." The reasons for this growth are basic—insufficient funds to get ahead of the curve and aging infrastructure, much of which is 40 or more years old, dating back to the days of Mission 66—the last time our nation made a significant new investment in the parks.

The backlog is analogous to maintaining your car: If you do not pay for regular oil changes and maintenance, you pay much more to replace the engine or the car, itself. Many parks lack the staff and budget to provide regular, routine care for historic buildings, road repair, and other vital infrastructure needs. As a consequence, the backlog continues to worsen, historic structures continue to decay, and many park roads deteriorate to the point where they are unsafe. The most recent estimates of the size of the backlog range between \$4.5 billion and \$9.7 billion.

One illustrative example of how the backlog impacts specific parks is Canyonlands National Park in Utah, which celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2004 and has a backlog of \$36 million. Three of every five historic structures in the park are deteriorating. In addition, archival and museum collections do not get the attention they deserve because the park must share its part-time curator with three other parks. This is typical of many national parks.

### **Heritage At Risk**

Many national parks do not contain all the resources they were created to protect, making land acquisition and other innovative approaches necessary to protect them. Unfortunately, funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), a central tool for acquiring nationally important parkland for four decades, has been under steady attack in recent years. While the federal

side of LWCF, which funds national park acquisitions, achieved a high watermark of \$130 million in fiscal year 2002, Congress appropriated only \$55 million for the program last year, and the administration's request for this year is \$53 million.

Insufficient funding jeopardizes our ability protect historic landscapes, remarkable natural areas, civil war battlefields, and other priceless pieces of America. For example, today one of the most exciting opportunities for protection of our Civil War history is at Petersburg, in Virginia, where the Park Service is attempting to protect an additional 7,238 acres associated with the Petersburg battlefield and expand interpretive themes to better reflect the roles of African Americans and of women in the Petersburg Campaign, and in the siege and defense of Petersburg.

In 1993, at the request of Congress, the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission reported that 23,000 of the more than 100,000 acres of lands associated with the Petersburg campaign retained their integrity. In the decade since, some of these lands have been lost to suburban, commercial, and industrial development. And development pressures in southeastern Virginia continue to escalate. In only a few years, pressures at Petersburg likely will be comparable to those now faced by Valley Forge, Fredericksburg, and Harpers Ferry, each of which has faced high-profile, high-stakes, expensive battles against proposed development on sacred ground in the recent past.

Last year at Harpers Ferry, Congress authorized a boundary change to allow the park to add 1,240 acres of historic lands along School House Ridge, lands key to the Confederate victory at the siege of the town in September 1862. While most of the lands already were owned by other federal agencies, 191 acres were privately owned. In 2002 the Park Service estimated it would need \$3.7 million to acquire the entire 191 acres, but land values in the area are rising rapidly. Congress approved \$2.9 million in LWCF funds for fiscal year 2005, which will be used to acquire two tracts totaling 111 acres. Development proposals are actively moving forward on almost all of the remaining 80 acres in expanded boundary, but the current proposed budget for the Park Service does not include money for protecting this remaining historic landscape.

### **Partnerships**

The long-standing tradition of philanthropy, volunteerism and partnership remains enormously important to the future of our national parks. It remains, however, only one part of the solution due to the enormous fiscal needs of the parks. In fact, the scarcity of federal operating funds means the Park Service is relying on many private organizations that raise funds for the parks to help pay critical, core operating expenses. Whereas these organizations historically have



contributed a margin of excellence to the parks, many now contribute the margin of survival, because the federal government is not living up to its side of the bargain.

Partnerships take many forms. One partnership under threat due to insufficient funding is the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. In 1998, Congress created this unique program to preserve historic sites and promote partnerships that educate the public about the historical significance of the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad refers to the informal network of safe houses, waterways, routes, and sites, used by freedom seekers to make their escape from slavery to freedom.

The Network to Freedom is the only federal program dedicated to the interpretation and preservation of Underground Railroad history. With a staff of six coordinators, the Network to Freedom has ably assisted community partners across the country with research, documentation, and interpretation of local Underground Railroad stories. In five short years, the Network to Freedom has expanded to include sites and programs in 26 states and the District of Columbia, and has greatly enhanced our understanding of this important chapter in American history.

In fact, success has attached itself to every portion of the Network to Freedom program except one: funding. The program has an annual operating budget of \$482,000--less than one third of the \$1.5 million the program needs to sufficiently cover the salaries of its 6 full time employees and to fund other program expenses. The grant-making portion of the program—the very heart of the effort to help communities preserve these important sites—was not funded as part of the administration's proposed budget for fiscal year 2006.

The fiscal situation for this program is so dire that in February of this year, Network to Freedom staff began accepting a series of voluntary 3-month reassignments to other programs and offices in order to make their meager budget stretch as far as possible. These reassignments, even for short periods of time, further reduce the ability of the program to fulfill its mission to "promote and preserve" Underground Railroad history.

### **Efficient Management of Shrinking Discretionary Budgets**

The national parks need additional funding and must wisely manage their scarce resources. That is why NPCA has placed such a significant emphasis on providing the Park Service with the tools to develop business plans and to implement innovative approaches to strategies like fleet

management that help scarce dollars go farther. Nearly 100 parks have now developed their own business plans, but they need to do more. Park managers of every rank and position need a firm grasp of park system laws, regulations, and policies and need training in the art of professional management. And they need the tools to maximize the effectiveness of their dealings with concessionaires, volunteers, gateway communities, philanthropies, and other partners.

Business plans of individual national parks are among the best available tools for understanding the fiscal situation in the national parks. The National Park Business Plan Initiative began in 1998 as a partnership between NPCA, the National Park Service, and a consortium of private philanthropies. The program placed management students from some of the country's top MBA programs in parks to review the parks' fiscal status; the resulting analyses show the level of funding and staffing necessary to operate each park to meet congressional mandates, visitor expectations, and preservation needs. The Park Service now runs the program itself.

An analysis of national park business plans to date reveals that annual operations of the national parks are underfunded by well over \$600 million. A number of factors have contributed to and compounded this shortfall, including unbudgeted cost of living increases, unreimbursed storm damage, insufficient funding for homeland security needs, and across-the-board cuts to final appropriations bills. Over the past three years, the operating budget of the parks has increased by only 6 percent, or approximately 2 percent annually. The President's fiscal year 2006 budget requests an increase of only \$50 million, or 3 percent—which barely keeps the parks even given inflation and other costs. Importantly, the administration this year did a better job budgeting for fixed costs, but the amount proposed remains insufficient. Without more significant increases to their operating budgets, our parks will continue to face chronic shortfalls, threatening the resources the parks were established to protect and adversely affecting the experience of the millions of the visitors to the parks every year.

The overall budget for the national park service has been stagnant since fiscal year 2001. Importantly, Congress has recently focused within that budget on increasing base operations funding for the individual national parks. But the amounts appropriated have not made a dent in the \$600 million annual operations shortfall, and all parts of the Park Service budget are under enormous stress. If recent funding trends continue, we predict that the budget picture for parks will only worsen over the next five years, which would require further reductions in visitor services and park resource protection activities.

*Inflation Impacts*

Among of the most significant root causes of the parks annual shortfalls is inflation and growth in staff workload. For example, the annual operating budget for Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, which completed a business plan in 2002, grew only 12% in real dollars from 1980 to 2000. Meanwhile, park electricity costs climbed 70% and natural gas costs climbed 68%.

*Cost of Living Adjustments*

Unbudgeted cost of living adjustments have cost the national park system approximately \$50 million over the past two years. While the proposed Park Service budget for fiscal year 2006 attempts to account for most anticipated increases, the budget request for FY 2005 provided only 46% of the funding needed to cover pay costs for staff. Furthermore, the administration has budgeted less for cost-of-living adjustments for the Park Service and other civilian employees than for the military, which is an unrealistic proposal based on history. For example, in its 2005 budget the administration proposed a 3.5% pay increase for military personnel, but only a 1.5% increase for civilian employees, including Park Service employees. As it has done consistently, Congress provided pay parity for military and civilian employees. As a result, individual parks have had to absorb these unbudgeted pay increases for their employees, narrowing what some refer to as the “toilet paper gap”—the difference between a park’s total annual operating budget and its required annual salary costs. This “gap” is what parks rely on to cover necessary non-salary and benefit expenses—purchasing toilet paper for park restrooms, printing brochures for park visitors, hiring seasonal rangers to protect and educate visitors in the peak season, and buying tar to repair cracks in roads and shingles to patch leaky roofs on park buildings. When salary costs climb at a higher rate than a park’s operations budget, a park manager loses his or her ability to support necessary expenses and visitor services and resource protection.

For example, while appropriations for Gettysburg National Military Park increased by \$309,000 in fiscal year 2005, the purchasing power of the park—the money park managers have to spend on programmatic needs—actually decreased by \$65,000 due to cost-of living pay increases, technology assessments, and other unfunded mandates placed on the park. Unbudgeted salary adjustments and other cost-of-living increases greatly affect the budget of parks like Gettysburg, because more than 90% of its operating costs must be used to pay the salaries and benefits for the park’s dedicated employees.

*New Homeland Security Costs*

The Park Service's operational woes are being compounded by unfunded demands related to homeland security. Examples of these costs include the protection of key assets and operational security at icon and border parks, radio communication upgrades, and the temporary relocation of staff on detail to protect parks during elevated threat levels. Since September 11, 2001, the Park Service has spent \$26 million from its operating budget for security needs, primarily in border and icon parks. The National Park Police have spent an additional \$14 million, for a total expenditure of \$40 million. The Park Service now estimates it must pay \$40 million in new, recurring security costs annually.

Homeland security demands also affect the Park Service budget in other ways. For example, construction costs associated with increased security needs at five locations—Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument, and Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St Louis, and Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona—have totaled \$48 million since September 11, 2001. The Park Service does not receive any compensation from the Department of Homeland Security for the costs it incurs and is forced to pay the bills by reducing resources devoted to core operational needs like resource protection and visitor services.

*Across-the-board cuts*

Across-the-board cuts have also taken their toll on the budget of the National Park Service. While one or two percent cuts may not appear particularly significant, these cuts have severe impacts on park budgets.

Since 2002, across-the-board reductions have cost the national parks more than \$50 million in operations funding. Last year alone, the across-the-board reduction to the final fiscal year 2005 appropriations bill for the Park Service reduced by \$24 million the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee's planned increase to parks' operating budgets (from an increase of \$98 million going into Conference, to the final increase of \$74 million).

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

In 11 years, America will celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the creation of the National Park System and Park Service. While Congress established a number of parks prior to 1916, starting

with the world's first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872, there was no unified professional government agency dedicated to the protection and promotion of parks until President Woodrow Wilson signed the National Park Organic Act. The creation of the first parks and the Park System required bold vision on the part of leaders had the foresight to realize the necessity for protecting and preserving many poignant examples of our nation's heritage. Their gift to us can only be fully realized if we confront the parks' fiscal challenges every year for the next eleven years.

If Congress wishes to realize this vision and tackle the funding and management problems facing America's parks, we recommend a series of actions:

- Increase the parks' base operations budget by a total of \$150 million--\$100 million over the president's request for fiscal year 2006--an amount sufficient to begin reducing the \$600 million annual shortfall;
- Pass the National Park Centennial Act;
- Provide \$320 million per year for the Park Roads and Parkways Program in the transportation reauthorization bill, as requested by the administration, and \$90 million for alternative transportation needs;
- Continue to encourage private citizens and organizations to provide philanthropic support, including volunteer time, to help protect parks and educate visitors, in the full knowledge that philanthropy is extremely important but can only be part of the solution;
- Support and encourage the Park Service to expand business planning and implementation, promote managers who are forthright about park challenges, reward creativity and performance, and equip park employees with the tools they need to deal with the complex business relationships they confront every day.

Mr. Chairman, the national parks are at the core of our national identity, and they are one of America's truly unique gifts to the world. We owe it to our forebears, ourselves, and our grandchildren to see that these remarkable pieces of America are preserved forever. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am happy to answer any questions.